

Spirit Saves the Day

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Thesis Advisor

Barb Bogue

A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely belonging to Barb Bogue, the thesis advisor. The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the printed name.

**Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana**

December 2003

Graduating December 2003

Spirit Saves the Day is a collection of seven children's stories and one poem. All pieces are original and were conceived only for this project. Some pieces offer morals or life lessons, while others are purely for entertainment. The characters are all original creations of the author, though some have been used in previous stories. The pieces are united by situations and humor that would appeal to young children. The stories were inspired by various influences in the author's life, including family, friends, and pets.

--- I would like to thank Barb Bogue for taking on the role of advisor on top of so many other responsibilities. Your encouragement and understanding were limitless, your advice never failed to be useful.

--- Many thanks are owed to Barb Stedman for being available for assistance whenever I required it, for this project or any other.

--- To my parents, for their support and encouragement. To both my parents and grandparents, for their time spent reading drafts.

— To my mom, for inspiration of a sublimely strange nature. To my brother for allowing me to use his experiences with his first year of hockey for a story. To Micheale, for thinking about worms. To Charlotte, wherever you are, for your love of color and always being yourself.

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The most valuable aspects of my experience as an Honors student at Ball State have been the freedom afforded me to explore areas of literature that I might not have been exposed to otherwise and the independence to explore them as I see fit. My thesis is a representation of this; I was able to write in an area of literature that is quite often overlooked, books for early readers. I had taken the course offered by the English department in writing children's literature, at that time taught by Barb Bogue, during Spring 2002 and thoroughly enjoyed every part of the class. Writing a collection of children's stories became the only thing that I wanted to do for my honors thesis. I knew that I wanted to go graduate school for literature, that I was going to be writing long critical essays for the rest of my life, and that this might be my last opportunity to write children's stories with guidance and suggestions. I was fortunate enough to procure Barb Bogue as my advisor for this project.

My first step was to find ideas. I began by doing a series of free-writings, a technique used to gather ideas that I learned from Barb. I came up with openings for five stories, three of which I actually turned into pieces in this collection ("The Cookies," "The Treasure of Homanamana," "Spirit Saves the Day"). Three others were inspired by family and friends ("Worms," "Today is a Hat Day," "Dennis the Hockey Dog"). The long poem in the collection was patterned after the work of Shel Silverstein, one of my favorite childhood authors. The last story, "Addy's Rainy Day," was random inspiration from ruined plans on a stormy day during the summer.

Once I had the premise in mind, I began to visualize the story. I always have a clear visual image in mind before I start to write. I can see the characters; I know them

very well even if they are not characters that I have used before. The settings are places I know as well as my own home, whether based on real places or not. I can quite often see an entire scene in sharp clarity before I begin; sometimes it's the opening and other times it's the pivotal action. I don't always know exactly where the story will take me. Sometimes I have an entire story planned out in my head before I start; I'll think about it for weeks before I write a word. Other times I commence writing and rely on the characters to take the story where it needs to go.

For four of the stories, I began with a whole or partial handwritten draft. Some stories seemed better suited to paper and pencil the first time through. The physical act of putting writing utensil to page seems more tangible at times, as though I am accomplishing more. The other half of the stories were written directly on my computer. There were times when typing was more conducive to creativity; I wrote the first draft of "Rainy Day" on my computer in under three hours.

Not all of the stories came so easily. Many of them were written over a period of several days or even weeks. I found that I could not plan on being able to write every day. My life and other class requirements inexorably interrupted my plans and blew away deadlines that I set for myself. Knowing that this would probably be the case, I planned two semesters and a summer to complete my thesis and develop it to a stage that I was pleased with. Even so, I still had far more ideas than time.

Working with Barb again was very enjoyable. She was very understanding when I was unable to write as much as I had promised, and very willing to meet any time I needed her advice. Her suggestions were always helpful, and helped me to find strengths and weaknesses in my writing. I knew before I began this project began that I

was good at characterizations and dialogue, but struggled with endings. Barb helped me to see what my conclusions lacked and how to fix them; usually I ended the story too quickly and needed more resolution. She helped me to recognize that my syntax is frequently convoluted in early drafts, and can obscure meaning and take away from the story. I had never noticed this problem; I just felt at times something was wrong and I didn't exactly know what or how to fix it. One positive thing she helped me to see is that my ideas are clear and childlike, that I have the ability to think as child would.

In writing for this project, I learned more about writing and myself as a writer. The most important thing I discovered is if a story isn't working, it's best to step away from it. Forcing your way through it shows in the substandard and labored quality of the writing; these things are painfully obvious in a 5-8 page children's story. Sometimes if I left a story for a few days and came back to with a fresh view, it was easier to complete a draft or make edits. Other times I had to abandon an idea completely.

I now enjoy editing as much as I do writing first drafts. Before this project, I frequently looked at editing as a painful job and put it off as long as possible. I thoroughly enjoyed editing this series of stories because they all seemed to develop into something better, not just something different. I was able to keep to my original idea, or change it as Barb advised and as I saw fit with very little difficulty. I used editing as a refuge, a sort of "treat" when I needed a break from working on literary criticism.

Creativity cannot be planned, or, at least, mine can't be. I had expected to have 10 first drafts done by the end of the second summer session of classes, after beginning in February. I quickly found that I had been more than a little ambitious in my planning; I was still writing first drafts into early October. Fortunately, Barb was very understanding

and I had allowed myself time for just such an occasion. I cut myself off after eight new stories; I wanted to allow time for editing and polishing in order for these stories to be of the best quality I could offer. ✎ ✎

Several of the stories are longer than I had anticipated, closer to ten pages than five. I was a little worried by this at first, but I read the longer pieces through carefully, searching for sections that were superfluous, and found very few. I came to the conclusion that these stories, namely "Spirit Saves the Day" and "Treasure of Homanamana," were suited for slightly older children than I had originally intended. I was somewhat surprised by this realization, but rather pleased at the same time.

I also discovered that I seem to have an unconscious obsession with dogs. Seven of the eight pieces have dogs as characters, and four of them center entirely on canines. It was not in any way intentional. When I realized that I had done this, I thought of former Poet Laureate Billy Collins, who was asked during his visit to Ball State why dogs featured in so many of his poems. His reply was that he didn't always put dogs in his poems; sometimes they just seemed to belong there or showed up of their own accord. Dogs did frequently just seem to wander into my stories without my intending their presence. I also thought of Norman Rockwell's explanation, "If a picture wasn't going very well, I'd put a puppy dog in it." Perhaps I unconsciously tried to improve my stories by placing dogs in them. More likely, however, it probably stems from the fact that I have always had at least one dog in my life from the time of birth.

The result of the work on my thesis is a collection of seven children's stories and one poem that are unified by humor and an upbeat spirit. Some of them have morals, such as don't be afraid to try new things, all mistakes aren't bad, or using your

imagination is fun. Others are simply amusing. Children should be allowed to read for pleasure as well as adults. Many of my favorite books from my childhood were the ones that made me laugh, and I hope to impart that to other children.

The Cookies

Dennis the Dog had just started eating his favorite lunch of liver salad with sausage dressing when the phone rang. It has to be Kelly the Cat, thought Dennis, she always calls when I'm eating.

"Oh, Dennis," said Kelly. "I've got the most wonderful idea!"

"I was right," said Dennis.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just tell me what we're going to do today. Will I need bug spray?"

Dennis hated bugs.

"No, silly. I just got a new cookbook and I think we should bake cookies this afternoon."

"That actually sounds like fun. Why don't we do it my kitchen?" Dennis was very fond of his blue-and-white tiled kitchen with dark gray counter tops.

"Okay, I'll be over in a few minutes."

Dennis hung up the phone, smiling, and began munching his salad. Kelly actually has an idea that sounds like fun, he thought. She always wanted to do wild and crazy things that made Dennis feel a little sick. He was as brave as the next small white dog, but he was pretty sure he wasn't meant to water ski. He liked the sound of a quiet, safe afternoon of peaceful baking. But nothing was ever quiet, safe and peaceful with Kelly around, which was great most of the time. Dennis worried about his beautiful, spotless blue-and-white tiled kitchen with its squeaky clean dark gray counter tops. Kelly wasn't exactly a spotless-kitchen-kind-of-small brown cat.

"I hope I don't have to scrub the ceiling," sighed Dennis.

Just then the front door flew open. Kelly never knocked. "Hey, Dennis! Are you as excited as I am?"

"For once, I think I actually might be," said Dennis. "What kind of cookies do you want to make? And how messy will you, I mean, they be?"

"I was thinking peanut butter. Sound good to you? And I'm never messy."

"Uh, right. Sounds great. What do we need?"

"My guess would be peanut butter, but beyond that I don't know. That's what recipes are for."

"I'll get bowls and stuff, and you get out ingredients." Dennis began pulling out blue glass mixing bowls from the white cabinets while Kelly searched for ingredients.

"Where's the butter?" she asked in a muffled voice, her small brown head buried in the refrigerator.

"In the little butter thing in the door," said Dennis, as he carefully chose wooden spoons from the silverware drawer. Then he went to the white cabinet on the other side of the kitchen and gently pulled out the electric hand mixer from the bottom shelf.

"Where do you keep your peanut butter?" asked Kelly, her brown tail swishing from behind a cabinet door.

"Second shelf of the fridge," said Dennis.

Her tail bushed and she crawled out of the cabinet. She looked at him, crinkling her nose. "You keep your peanut butter in the fridge? You're weird."

"What? It's good cold."

Kelly placed the peanut butter on the dark gray counter top with all the other ingredients on the opposite side of the kitchen from where Dennis was standing. "I'll measure, you mix."

"Right," said Dennis, picking up the small white mixer.

Kelly flopped the butter and the peanut butter in the biggest blue glass bowl. "Mix these." She walked over to the oven and carefully turned it on, then set the temperature dial. "If we turn it on now, it'll be hot enough when we get done mixing stuff."

"Right," said Dennis again. He plugged in the small white mixer and gently lowered the silver beaters into the blue glass bowl. He pushed the "low" button and the beaters began to revolve slowly. This didn't seem fast enough to Dennis, so he pushed the "high" button. The beaters spun around very fast, whirring, clanging, and clanking against the glass, and slinging butter and peanut butter all over Dennis and the dark gray counter top. He turned off the mixer. "I think that's good enough," said Dennis as he wiped flecks of butter and peanut butter from his glossy black ears and head with a small white paw.

"Here's the stuff you have to mix now. Put the sugar in by itself and mix it a little, then add the rest of the stuff." She handed him a small blue glass measuring cup with sugar in it and a small blue glass mixing bowl with dry powders in it.

"Okay." He mixed in the sugar on "medium," and then began to study the powders in the blue bowl Kelly had handed him. He suspiciously sniffed the unfamiliar ingredients. She's following the recipe, he thought. What could go wrong? He turned on the mixer to "medium" again and mixed the bowl full of ingredients in with the butter, sugar and peanut butter.

Kelly added a yellowish-brown liquid while Dennis was still mixing.

"What was that?" he asked, still mixing.

"Egg and vanilla," she said from the other side of kitchen.

Dennis leaned over the bowl as he mixed. His sensitive black nose twitched as smelled the wonderful peanut butter cookie dough. It was a lovely color of light brown, sort of peanut buttery looking. It was fun to watch the batter spinning through the silver beaters. He liked using the mixer. He thought the dough looked a little thin, though, as though there were too many liquid ingredients in it.

Kelly leaned over the bowl and sniffed, too. "Mmm, smells great," she said.

"Does it look a little watery to you?" asked Dennis, slightly worried.

"The flour will make it thick." She handed him a blue glass measuring cup with flour in it. "Add this a little bit at a time. The recipe says that you'll have to stir in the last part because it'll get too thick for the mixer."

"Okay." Dennis added a little flour and turned on the mixer. Flour flew everywhere, covering Dennis and the dark gray counter top in a fine layer of flour. A cloud of flour hovered over him. He giggled sheepishly and coughed, "Whoops, wrong button!"

"You're all white now!" said Kelly, laughing. "And you were worried about me making a mess."

Dennis shrugged and shook off the flour. "I guess it'll all clean up." Dennis added flour until the dough was too thick for the mixer to work anymore. Then he started stirring in the flour with a wooden spoon. The dough was very thick and hard to stir. His small white paws began to hurt. "Kelly, I think it's your turn to stir now."

"That's fine," she said, coming over to his side of the kitchen. "I have to add the last ingredient anyway."

Dennis began cleaning up the flour on his shiny wooden floor with a wet dish rag while Kelly stirred the dough.

"All done," she said, panting. "Time to bake. I'll do that, if you want to keep cleaning."

"That would be great." Dennis was anxious to clean his kitchen. As he washed the blue glass measuring cups, he could smell the cookies baking. They smelled a little strange. "Kelly, are the cookies burning?"

"No," she said. "The first ones are already cooling. Want to try one?"

Dennis stared at the cookies. They didn't just smell funny, they looked funny, too. "What are those dark things in them?"

"Chopped liver," said Kelly.

"Liver?! Why would you put liver in peanut butter cookies?"

"Huh, I don't know. I never thought of that. But I followed the recipe."

"Let me see it."

Kelly handed him the book. "See, right here. It says to put in chopped liver."

Dennis groaned. "Kelly, the pages are stuck together. You mixed peanut butter cookies and liver salad."

"Really? Wow, that's bad. I thought they tasted good anyway."

"You ate one?" said Dennis, feeling a little ill.

"Yeah, it was great. Try one." She shoved an entire cookie in his mouth.

He closed his eyes and prepared his tongue for the worst, grimacing as he began to chew very slowly. "Oh, Kelly," he said through a mouthful of cookie, "this is...this is...great!" He was surprised to find the cookie tasted good. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before, actually. He loved peanut butter, and he loved liver, so why not mix them? "We should send this in to the cookbook and have it put in there." He grabbed another cookie and stuffed it into his mouth.

"See," said Kelly, "I told you so. Not all mistakes are horrible, you know."

"Yeah, and this one tastes pretty good. Make sure you remember what you did. We should make these again next week."

Kelly beamed. "Maybe we could make them for the town baking contest next month."

"Definitely." Dennis crammed another cookie in his mouth and smiled as he chewed. "But first, we have to get this kitchen clean. I'll mop if you'll finish the dishes."

After they finished cleaning and all the cookies were baked, Dennis and Kelly sat by the fire in Dennis' fuzzy blue armchairs drinking milk and munching cookies. This was a great day, thought Dennis as he patted his full belly. The mess had been easy to clean up and the cookies were great even though they weren't quite right. Suddenly he felt a little queasy as he thought, I wonder what she'll want to do tomorrow.

Addy's Rainy Day

A blustery thunderstorm tossed the large oak tree in her yard as Addy sat looking out her bedroom window, feeling more than a little depressed. She was supposed to be playing in her friend Ben's new pool. She tossed her inflatable blue dinosaur and her neon green swim goggles in the general direction of her open closet. What was there to do now? Her mom wouldn't let her watch cartoons all day. She said it wasn't healthy. Addy didn't care, she just wanted something to do.

Addy pressed her forehead against the smooth cold glass of the window and watched the rain sheeting down. The wind whooshed and swished through the big oak tree outside, bending the branches every which way. The rocking of the tree reminded her of a boat she had seen in a movie once.

"A boat," she thought. "Hmmm..." She grabbed Morty the cockatiel from his cage in the corner and put him on her shoulder. "Arrr, the seas are rough today, first mate Morty." The bird whistled.

Addy folded red construction paper into a pointy hat. She made an eye patch from black paper and a couple of rubber bands. She put on both. Next she roughly cut a sword out of a cardboard box she found in her closet. The sword made her feel like a real pirate. "There, now we're ready to face the crew."

"Woo-hoo," said Morty.

Addy's shelves of stuffed animals became her crew, trembling with fear as she stood on the foot of her bed surveying them. Her first mate squinted at the crew from her shoulder. "Arrr, you filthy pirate men! Get yourselves ready for a terrible storm,

probably the worst you've ever seen. So pull on all the ropes, and do whatever it is you're supposed to do, arrr!" The last "arr" sent the crew scurrying all over the pretend boat, pulling on ropes and screaming to one another. Captain Addy was the most feared pirate on all the seas of every planet. No one knew this better than her crew.

"You!" shouted Captain Addy, pointing at a fluffy pink hedgehog. "Move faster or you'll walk the board, I mean, plank, arrr!" The frightened crewman scuttled faster across the deck. "So, first mate Morty, where's the map to the island?"

"Addy," said Morty, nibbling her hat.

"Aw, Morty," said Addy, pushing her hat upright again. She tore a piece of brown construction paper around the edges to make it look old and said, "Here's the map. Looks like we need to go that way." She pointed to her left. "Where's my one-legged, boat steering guy?"

He limped onto the deck, his crutch and wooden leg thumped loudly upon the wet boards. "Arr, Cap'n Addy, what is it your wish?"

"Turn the boat that way," she said, pointing to her left.

"Ay, Cap'n," he said as he thumped off to follow orders.

"Won't be long now, first mate," said Addy, surveying the stormy horizon for signs of land. "Hard to see in this storm, though."

"Pretty bird," said Morty.

"Land ho!" cried a crewman.

"Oh goody!" said Addy. "I mean, arrr, good for that. Our ship would not hold through much more of this storm." She leaped down from her place high on the ship and ran ashore. "Arr, maties, follow me and beware the natives!" She sprinted up the beach,

sword drawn, toward a large rock formation, and hid behind it. "Look, first mate, there's the native queen."

"Woo-woo!" said Morty.

The queen stood proudly arrayed in her finery, wearing a feathered dress and dripping in gold jewelry. "Would you like some cookies?"

"What?" asked Addy. The image of the island and the queen faded away as the yellow-tiled kitchen and her mom came into focus.

"Cookies," said her mom. "I just baked a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Want some?"

"Oh, sure," said Addy. She took removed hat and eye patch and laid down the sword and map. After munching one cookie, she gave Morty a small piece. He chewed happily and made a large mess on her shoulder. She brushed off the crumbs and let Morty have a drink of her milk.

"Looks like you're having fun even though it's raining," said her mom.

"Oh, yeah. We're having fun. Thanks, Mom," she yelled over her shoulder as she ran back down the hall to her room.

She put Morty down on the bed and tied a towel around her neck. "Now I am no longer quiet Adeline Delfenco, I am Super Addy! Able to control the weather, fly really fast and eat a whole cookie in one bite! And with my trusty sidekick, Bird Brain, we are unstoppable!"

"Woo-hoo!" said Morty. He flapped onto her shoulder and licked her ear.

"Off we go to defeat super monsters and bad guys. We must defend our city. Away, Bird Brain!" Super Addy and Bird Brain snuck out of their secret lair and flew downtown, looking for a really big monster to defeat.

They found one soon enough. A large hairy, yellow monster with great big claws was terrorizing everyone at the shopping mall, yelling at them, taking their bags, spilling their drinks and calling them names. "We'll hide over there, behind that bench and jump out at him when he comes near, okay? We have to be quiet."

Super Addy and Bird Brain hid behind a bench and waited for the right time to jump out and surprise the big hairy monster. "Now!" she screamed as the monster attacked the hot dog cart. They sprang from behind the bench and Super Addy shouted, "Ah-ha!"

"Peekaboo!" said Bird Brain.

The hairy yellow monster roared with fury and leaped at them from the top of the hot dog cart, its claws and fangs bared as it knocked both Super Addy and Bird Brain right out of the air. The monster landed on top, and began licking Super Addy's face.

"Aw, Amadeus get off," said Addy as she pushed her golden retriever off her chest. The shopping mall faded into the cream and pale blue living room. Morty flapped away angrily and landed on the living room couch, hissing. "Oh, stop it, Morty. He didn't hurt you." Amadeus happily licked Addy's hands. "You want to play, too? Okay, go find a toy."

Amadeus ran away to find something to play with, and Morty sat on the couch with very ruffled feathers. Addy cuddled Morty to make him feel better while she waited

for Amadeus to come back with a toy. "Morty, you big baby," she said as she scratched under his wings.

Just then Amadeus came prancing back in the living room, growling and shaking a fuzzy, squeaky bear.

"OK, Amadeus, I'm gonna get you!" shouted Addy as she dove onto the carpet after the big dog. Morty stayed on the back of the couch and happily whistled the song from the *Andy Griffith Show* while Addy and Amadeus wrestled in the floor.

"Addy, time for your bath," her mom called out from the kitchen.

"Huh?" asked Addy, lying in the floor with the yellow dog standing over her, wagging his tail. "What do you mean?"

"Well, the day is over," said her mom, poking her head into the living room.

"You've been playing for quite awhile."

"Really? I didn't even notice." She climbed out from under the dog and scratched his ears. His tail thumped the floor. "I don't think I want to take a bath tonight."

"Tough, I'm the mom and I said you have to. Put Morty away and come in the bathroom."

Addy picked up Morty and carried him upstairs to her room. "I can't believe that we played for a whole afternoon. Maybe rainy days aren't so bad. I mean, who wants to play in a pool, anyway? We were super heroes and pirates, weren't we?"

"Pretty bird," said Morty.

"Hurry up, Addy," called her mom from the bathroom.

"Coming!" shouted Addy as she ran down the hall.

"So are you still disappointed about not getting to play in Ben's pool?" asked her mom.

"No, not so much," said Addy. "He gets grumpy way easier than Morty and Amadeus."

"So you weren't bored?"

"No way! Morty and I were pirates and all kinds of stuff. It was great!"

"That's good, because it's supposed to rain all week."

"In that case, I'm going to have to get a better super hero cape." Addy eyed the large red towel on the towel rack. "Mom, do you think a red towel would make a good cape?"

"Not until after you've had a bath and dried off with it," said her mom. "Then we'll see."

Spirit Saves the Day

It was a beautiful sunny day in northern Minnesota. Sparrows were chirping. Squirrels chased one another up and down the tree trunks. The air was crisp and cold, but there wasn't a cloud in the bright blue sky. Spirit, a husky, barked half-heartedly at two squirrels playing on a branch in the oak tree and then sat down on the red brick patio. "It's just not worth it," she said out loud.

"What isn't?" said Isabella, the black dachshund from next door.

"Barking at squirrels, Izzy. They're everywhere since there's no snow."

"I gave up hours ago. They're just taunting me now." Dirt flew as Izzy dug a hole under the fence. She poked her shiny black head through the hole. "Always nicer having a conversation face to face, don't you think? You seem awfully down. What's the problem?"

"The snow, Izzy."

Isabella looked around. "What snow, Spirit?"

"That's just it. There isn't any. I can't figure it out. I mean, it's February already."

"Yeah, what gives?" said Muriel, the tan-and-white bulldog who always wore a pink rhinestone collar. She squeezed through a loose board in the fence on the other side of the yard. "Snow has never been my favorite kind of weather. I prefer warm sunshine on my back while I'm lying on a beach, like when I used to live in Florida. It is rather odd that we haven't had any snow at all."

Izzy and Spirit rolled their eyes. Muriel was always talking about Florida.

"I haven't smelled snow all winter long," said Gordon the brown-and-white Ibizan hound as he squeezed between the garage and the last fence post. "How is everyone today?"

"Depressed," said Spirit. "I miss the snow."

"I think we all do," said Gordon. "Except, perhaps Muriel."

"Oh I wouldn't mind having a little snow," said Muriel. "But not too much, you know."

"Gordon, what is that awful smell?" asked Spirit. "I've smelled it for days now."

"I'm not sure. I've been wondering that, too," said Gordon, looking very puzzled.

"We should go find out."

"Right," said Izzy. "Let's move." She pushed on a knot in the fence with her small black paw and a square of the fence swung away like a door. The dogs filed through it one by one.

Gordon led the way down the alley, sniffing the air, the grass and trees, trying to find where the strange scent might be coming from. He stopped in front of a large dark blue house with a white front door and shutters. "It's awfully strong in front of this blue house."

"Let's sneak up and see what's happening!" said Izzy.

"Stay back here on the sidewalk," said Spirit. "And keep quiet!" Everyone looked at Muriel.

"What?" she said. "Why is everyone looking at me? I can be just as quiet as the rest of you."

Spirit hunkered down low to the ground and crawled slowly on her white belly to the front porch. She crept up the three blue steps. Ever so slowly she inched her way across the porch until she was under the window. She raised her gray head up until it was even with the white window sill and peered inside with one blue eye.

“What do you see?” Muriel asked in a very loud voice.

“Shh!” hissed Spirit. “Let me look!” She looked through the window into a homey living room. In front of a cheery stone fireplace lay a blue rag rug on shiny wooden floor. A wooden rocking chair sat empty next to a fluffy-looking blue couch. Past the couch, spirit could make out the blue and white kitchen. There was no one home.

She stood up and said, “I don’t see anything weird. It doesn’t even look like there’s anyone—”

Just then a loud noise from behind the house made all the dogs jump. Muriel screamed. Gordon clamped a paw firmly over her mouth. Spirit flattened herself to the blue porch floor and shivered. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” said Izzy, a little scared. “Should we go look?”

Spirit set her jaw firmly. “You bet. Stay close to me, and don’t make any noise!” Everyone looked at Muriel, who just shrugged and pointed to Gordon’s paw, which was still covering her mouth.

The dogs crawled in a line behind Spirit and rounded the corner of the blue house. A brown shack sat at the bottom of a small hill. A shiny unused yellow snowplow sat next to the shack. Clouds hovered over the top of the small brown building. Spirit’s ears pricked at a strange metallic humming coming from the shack. “What could that be?” whispered Izzy.

"I don't know," said Spirit, "but I think we should find out." She inched her way, paw by paw, to the strangely humming brown shack. Izzy followed right behind her, with Muriel and Gordon behind them. The humming became louder and louder as they got closer. "Ugh, this is where the smell is coming from."

"I think it's machine oil," said Gordon.

Spirit pressed gently on the door with one big white paw. The rough wooden door of the shack was closed tight. The windows were covered with newspaper. "Izzy, follow me around this side. Muriel and Gordon go that way," she whispered. She pressed herself against the rough wooden wall and inched her way to the window. Izzy was close behind.

Spirit pressed closer to the window. A huge gray metal machine took up most of the room in the shack. This must be what is making the humming noise and that funny smell, she thought. The machine was a big metal box with all kinds of dials and buttons and two big levers on the front. The top looked like a great metal funnel and stuck out of the roof of the brown shack. The machine hummed and vibrated, shaking the whole building. Izzy crept up to another tear in the paper and stood on her hind legs to see inside.

Just then a black-haired man came into view. Spirit and Izzy both jumped at the sight of Joe, the snow plow driver. He pushed a purple button on the front of the machine, then smiled and stood up, laughing. "How could winter get any better?" he said, throwing his arms wide. "No snow in sight, and there won't be any, either. This machine will take care of all the snow for the whole winter." He patted the machine, and then locked the padlock on the rough wooden door, whistling as he walked away.

"Run!" hissed Spirit through her teeth. She and Izzy scrambled to get behind the shack and nearly collided with Gordon and Muriel, who were coming from the other direction.

Joe walked to the white back door of his dark blue house, still whistling. He went inside and disappeared into the kitchen.

"We have to find a way to get inside and stop that machine," said Spirit. "Let's see. Izzy, can you dig a hole under the wall of this shack?"

Izzy sniffed and pawed at the dirt at the base of the brown wooden building.

"Yup, it looks like it's just a couple of inches down in the dirt. No problem at all."

"Muriel and Gordon can keep a lookout for people," said Spirit. "Gordon can stay here by the shack, and Muriel can go up closer to the house."

"Why do I have to go up to the house?" asked Muriel, pouting.

"Because you have the biggest mouth," said Izzy.

"Right, let's go," said Gordon.

Muriel went up to the house and Izzy started digging. Spirit and Gordon stood nearby watching nervously. Izzy disappeared under the wall. A moment later her black head popped out from beneath the wall. "Ready!" she said. She saluted and dived back into the hole.

Spirit squeezed under the wall, finding it a tight fit for a big white and gray dog. Her ears hurt from the constant loud humming inside the shack.

While Izzy looked at each side of the gray metal machine, Spirit studied each of the gizmos on the front. A large red button in the middle read, "STOP." "I found out how to stop it," she shouted to Izzy, "but Joe could just start it again." Then she spotted a

purple lever near the left side reading, "REVERSE." She turned to Izzy and yelled, "I found it! Izzy, I found out how to make it spit the snow out!"

"Great!" said Izzy. "I found a door on the right side that's filled with wires. So after we reverse it, we can make sure it never works again."

"I'll go get Muriel and Gordon," said Spirit. "We're going to need help." She squeezed through the hole under the wall again.

"Joe fell asleep inside," said Muriel.

"Great!" said Spirit. "Gordon, we need help inside." Gordon and Spirit slipped under the wall again to join Izzy.

"Here we go," said Spirit, her heart thumping loudly under her furry chest. She lifted a large, white shaky paw and pressed the big red button that said, "STOP." The machine clunked loudly and then fell silent. Spirit swallowed hard. She stood on her hind legs and used her front paws to pull down the big purple lever that said, "REVERSE." The machine wheezed, coughed and spluttered, and then slowly began clanking and clunking. This was a very different noise from the humming before.

"AROOOO!" screamed Muriel. "He's coming!"

"Hurry," said Spirit. "Start tearing out wires!" She and Gordon and Izzy ran to the side door Izzy had found and began ripping out wires with their teeth and paws as fast as they could. The machine began to thump loudly, groaning and shaking violently. "Get out, quick!"

They ran for the hole under the back wall just as the machine began to fly apart, spraying snow all over the inside of the little brown shack.

The scene outside was like nothing any of them had ever seen. Muriel was hanging by her teeth from the back of the Joe's tan coat. He was turning in circles, trying to get her to let go, while other neighborhood dogs grabbed snapped at his brown shoes and pants legs, barking and growling. Clouds were belching and rolling from the top of the wooden shack, turning the blue sky a shadowy gray.

"Noooo!" screamed Joe. "I hate snow!"

"Why don't you just get a different job instead of ruining winter for everyone else?" asked Spirit. "Then you wouldn't have to be out in the snow all the time."

He stopped turning in circles. "What?" He looked amazed. Muriel was still hanging from his coat.

"You could be a mechanic or invent something," she said. "You're awfully good with machines."

"That's a wonderful idea!" He started to jump up and down, but realized he couldn't. Muriel was still hanging from his coat by her teeth.

"Let him go, Muriel," said Spirit.

"Are you sure?" asked Muriel through a mouthful of tan coat.

"He won't stop it snowing anymore," said Spirit.

Muriel dropped to the ground, still unsure. "If you say so."

Joe began running up and down his driveway, yelling for joy. "Whee! I love snow!" He lobbed a snowball at Spirit.

She leaped up and caught it in her mouth. "Oh, how I've missed snow," she said, chewing happily on her snowball.

"Snow is wonderful," said Joe. "Well, it is now that I don't 'have to plow it every single morning." He threw himself down in his yard and made a snow angel. "I'm going to start looking for a new job right now."

"Right now?" asked Spirit.

"Well, maybe not right now. Let's make a snowman!"

"How about a snowdog?" said Gordon.

"Okay, a snowdog," said Joe. "Thank you so much making me like snow again."

Worms

For Micheale, Ally, and Mom, and Amber and her "little wormy friends"

"Ugh, Mom. Why are there so many worms on the sidewalk today?" asked Michael as he walked down the sidewalk with his mom.

"Because it just rained," she answered. "Worms breathe through their skin and when it rains, there's too much water in the soil and they can't breathe, so they come up for air."

Michael grimaced as he stepped around each squirming worm on the wet sidewalk. "Just when I thought they couldn't get any more disgusting."

"Lots of people think worms are neat," said Michael's mom. "I used to hold them all the time when I was your age."

"Not me. Serious artists do not play with worms."

"Oh," said his mom. "Would you rather paint a picture for me today?"

Michael stood still for a moment, looking at the cloudy sky reflected in the puddle in front of him. "Yes," he said slowly. "I think I could produce a nice work of art today."

"I'll make some room on the fridge," said his mom as they reached the front door to their house.

"I was thinking more along the lines of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but the fridge will do for now."

Upstairs in his bedroom, Michael carefully put on his dad's best dress shirt on backwards to make a smock like a serious artist would wear. He poured some bottled water into a glass and gathered his brushes, Crayola paints, and paper and pondered

where to create his masterpiece. His mother had been a little miffed the last time he had worked on the cream-colored living room carpet, so he decided on the front porch.

He precisely arranged all of his materials and began wetting his brushes and paints. Worms littered the front walk and made it hard for Michael to think of something to paint. Ugh, worms, he thought. His stomach turned a little as he watched the wriggling worms.

Suddenly he noticed three worms crawling side by side up the walk straight for the front porch. That's weird, he thought. He'd never seen worms crawl together like that. They looked like three horses in a slow, steady race, trying to see who could get to the step first.

"Well, at least worms can't crawl up steps," he said out loud, trying to comfort himself.

But the worms kept crawling side by side, right up the step and onto the porch. Side by side they crept toward Michael's tray of paints. "Hey, get away from there!" said Michael. "Shoo! Go away!" He waved his hands in the air, trying to get the worms to leave without actually having to touch them.

But the worms kept crawling side by side until they were in the paint tray. The one on the left crawled into the blue, the middle one into the red, and the right one into the yellow. Michael watched as the three filthy worms wriggled and rolled in his beautiful paints. This is so gross I don't think I can move without throwing up, he thought.

Then the three worms carefully climbed out of the paint and onto the blank white paper. They began to crawl in straight lines, side by side again, the blue worm at the top, the red one in the middle, and the yellow one at the bottom of the page. Then the

blue worm swerved over the red and yellow worms and left purple and green streaks behind it. Then the yellow worm turned sharply and cut through the paint left by the red worm and made an orange streak. The blue and yellow worms veered all over the page, up and down, left and right, diagonal, in circles, and even coiled up like springs, hopping up and down like slimy pogo sticks, which Michael didn't even know worms could do. But the red worm just crawled slowly and steadily off the edge of the page in a straight line.

Michael remained frozen, thinking that he still might throw up if he moved. The blue worm did something Michael could only describe as a pirouette and landed off the page flat on its back on the concrete. The yellow worm lay in knots off the bottom corner of the page, panting slightly. The red worm shook off the paint like a dog and turned to Michael. "Well?" it said. "What do you think?"

These are definitely not normal worms, thought Michael as he tried to figure out what he had just seen. If he looked at the worms very closely, he could see tiny black eyes. He wondered if he had a fever.

"Helloooooo? Do you speak English? Spreckenzie Deutch? Habla Español?" shouted the yellow worm.

"Uh, I, um.....English," Michael said, pinching himself now and again just to make sure he wasn't dreaming.

"Well, then, do you like it?" demanded the now not so red worm.

"Like what?"

"Our painting, you ninny!" said the yellow worm.

Michael studied the painting. It was wildly abstract, a blur of colored lines and shapes. "I like it a lot. It's, um, very expressive. I -er- didn't know worms could paint. Or talk for that matter."

"Well, buddy, let me tell you-" began the yellow worm, squinting its tiny black eyes.

"Really now!" interrupted the blue worm. "There's no need to get hostile."

"Well, here we are, just trying to be friendly, and he has to go and insult us."

"I don't think he meant to insult us," added the red worm. "He just might be a little surprised by us."

"I don't think that surprised really covers it," said Michael. "Would it be rude of me to ask why you did this?"

The blue worm stood on its tail, drawing itself up to its full length and cleared its throat. "We believe that worm-human relations have declined in recent years and we are a task force representing a committee that has agreed to take steps to repair them."

Michael stared blankly at the blue worm.

"We want kids to play with us," said the yellow worm.

"We thought maybe painting would be a good start," said the red worm. "One of our scouts heard you talking about painting on your walk earlier, and we were sent out immediately."

"Right," said Michael. "Am I on TV? Is this a joke?"

"I assure you, sir, this is no jest," said the blue worm. "And to further the fun, I suggest monikers."

"What?" asked Michael.

"He wants you to name us," said the yellow worm.

"Oh, right. Okay, you will be Modigliani," he said pointing at the blue worm. "You can be Matisse," he said to the red worm. "And you are —"

"A girl," said the yellow worm.

"Miss O'Keefe," said Michael. The worms all smiled, looking at one another and feeling quite proud of their new names. "Um, now what?" he asked.

"Another painting?" suggested Modigliani.

Each worm posed for a portrait which Michael painted as true to life as he could. The portraits reflected the worms' personalities. Matisse was pictured sitting in front of a tank of tropical fish, painting them in abstract forms. Modigliani was reading a book while resting in a blue velvet chair by a fire place. Miss O'Keefe was playing a game of basketball with a ladylike flower tucked behind her ear, or where Michael thought her ear would be.

Then the four of them they did a painting together. Michael had to be careful with his brush, though, because Miss O'Keefe was terribly ticklish and fell into fits of giggles if he touched her with it. The finished product was a bright flower garden, complete with worms, of course.

Finally, the worms announced they were exhausted and needed a nap. Michael also felt the effects of a long afternoon of painting, so they decided to go inside. "Where would you like to sleep?" asked Michael. "I've never made a bed for a worm before."

"A nice, cushy pile of dirt will do just fine," said Matisse, yawning.

"Oh, Mom would just love that," said Michael. He went inside and got a box lid from a puzzle and carefully filled it with good, dark dirt from the flower bed. "How's this?"

"How lovely!" said Modigliani.

Michael carefully placed his new friends into their new bed and tried not to think about how wiggly and wet they felt in his hand. They weren't slimy, though, which surprised him. Mom would be proud, he thought. "Sleep well." A short time later, he heard faint snoring coming from under the dirt.

He tiptoed into the house, hoping his mom wouldn't see him carrying a box of dirt over her carpet. He placed the worm bed on the low wooden table next to his bed and carefully shut the door so he wouldn't wake them.

Then he gathered all his paints and brushes and the finished but still wet paintings and took them inside. He carefully washed his brushes and placed them, bristles up, in a jar to dry. He laid the wet paintings on the kitchen table to dry.

His mom walked in just as he was climbing off the stool in front of the kitchen sink. "Well," she said, studying the paintings on the table, "you've certainly been busy this afternoon. This is somewhat of a new subject for you, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Michael. "I'd never really thought about painting worms before."

"Oh, worms. That's what they are."

"What?! What do you mean? You couldn't tell they were worms?"

"Of course, I knew they were worms. Of course, I did. Worms, right. I was just afraid I might be interpreting your work wrong. I mean, I seem to remember you being pretty grossed out by worms on our walk earlier today."

“Well, that was before I took the time to get to know them. They’re really quite nice, very polite. Well, for the most part. And they opened me up to a whole new world of painting techniques.”

“Did they now? So you’re telling me you like worms now?”

“Yeah, worms are pretty great, once you get to know them. By the way, Mom, is it okay if I have a few friends over for dinner tonight? I promise they won’t eat much.”

What's it Like to be a Dog?

A Humble Homage to Shel Silverstein

What's it like to be a dog?
Is it better than being a frog?
I hear dogs are good at smelling,
but I'm not one so there's no telling.
While I'm at it, I do wonder
why my dog barks at thunder.
Why he runs in circles yapping
when someone at the door is rapping?
When his tail wags, is he happy?
or is he merely being sappy?

What does your dog like to eat?
Is her favorite pickled beets?
Does she like to have a bite
of everything you eat at night?
Will she only drink bottled water?
or from the toilet unless you've caught her?
Will she steal food if you're not looking?
Does she hate your dad's cooking?

What's it like to be a dog?
Is it like being a hog?
My dog likes to chase his tail,
but does that mean it's going to hail?
He always likes to chase a ball
up and down and up the hall,
and up and down and up the hill—
it always gives him such a thrill.
(unless, of course, he takes a spill,
in which case he feels a little ill)

If you were a dog, what would you do?
Bark and bark and bark 'til you turned blue?
(can a dog turn blue?
I don't know, do you?)
Jump high for a Frisbee, soar like a kite?
or give strangers a warning bite?
Would you do tricks for a biscuit?
or leave candy on the dish after you'd licked it?
Would you go swimming in a fountain?
or maybe even climb a mountain?
Would you sniff every tree in the forest?
or maybe you'd make friends with a cat named Morris?

What would you do if you were a dog?
Would you want to go for a jog?
Would you take an all-day nap?
or chase squirrels, perhaps?
Maybe you'd rather stand and sniff the wind
or your yard and squeaky toys valiantly defend.

I don't know what I would do,
do you?

I just know my dog is great.
(no matter what his weight)
I love him like no other,
lots more than my big brother.
My dog is my best friend.
We'll be together till the end.
The end of what, I don't know,
but wherever it is, that's where we'll go.

Today is a Hat Day

For Charlotte

"Today is a hat day," said Charlotte as she stood in front of her mirror, still in her zebra print pajamas. "But I should decide what to wear first, don't you think?" she asked Zelda, her golden retriever.

Zelda wagged her tail and licked Charlotte's hand.

Charlotte flipped through the low row of plastic hangers of clothes and decided to wear a lime-green-and-purple-striped skirt and a red tank top. She put on her favorite shoes, her red sparkly flip flops. "That looks great, doesn't it?" Zelda wagged in agreement. "Now to find a hat." Her hat collection hung on a special set of rainbow-colored hooks next to her wooden dresser.

A small royal blue hat with a little black veil hung on a yellow hook. It made her feel like a star in an old black and white movie. But the blue hat simply didn't look right with her outfit, so she hung it carefully back on its hook.

Next she tried on her red cowboy hat with the fake snake skin band. Charlotte liked to wear this hat when she was pretending to be Sheriff Charlotte, the best shot and most famous sheriff in the Old West. "No, this is too much red. It throws off the balance of the whole outfit. It simply won't work." She put the red hat on Zelda's head. "It looks better on you, Zel." Zelda barked and the hat fell off. "Silly dog."

Her green crocheted cap was the wrong color green. Her fuzzy yellow wide-brimmed hat didn't match at all. Her orange baseball cap clashed terribly. Her black bowler was too dressy. Her brown beret was too itchy. She even tried her floppy velvet leopard print hat, but nothing seemed to work.

“What am I going to do now?” She looked down at Zelda. “I know, we’ll look in Rob’s room. He has neat hats.”

Charlotte walked down the hall to his room. She knew he wouldn’t be very happy with her for going in his room when he wasn’t there, but she really needed a hat. Besides, he had already left for school. “Don’t tell,” whispered Charlotte to Zelda, who had followed her down the hall. “And be quiet so Mom doesn’t hear.”

Charlotte tiptoed into Rob’s room and Zelda crawled on her belly behind her. She closed the door and looked at the hats hanging from the back of it. They were mostly baseball caps, and almost all of them had Detroit Red Wings logos on them. Rob always let Charlotte choose a Red Wings hat to wear when they watched hockey games together. As much as she loved Rob’s hats, she just didn’t think that any of them would work today.

“Guess we’ll try Mom’s closet now,” she sighed. Zelda whimpered. “It’ll be okay. The perfect hat has to be here somewhere.” She patted the big dog on the head and scratched her floppy ears. “Let’s go.”

She walked to the other end of the hall to her parents’ room with Zelda following close on her heels. “Mom, can I look through your hats? I can’t find one I like.”

“Sure, honey,” said her mom, busy getting ready for work.

Charlotte dug through the box of hats her mother kept in the bottom of her closet. She found a heavy winter hat patched together from old pieces of bright colored fabrics. She adored it, but it didn’t quite match her outfit or the warm weather.

Then she spotted a Pittsburgh Penguins cap. Her mom was the only one in the family who didn't like the Red Wings. Not only would the hat not match, it was the wrong team, and that would just throw off her whole day.

As Charlotte shoved aside an ugly olive green sock cap, she spied funky brown corduroy hat, a black satin ball cap, and a maroon fedora. Charlotte liked all of these hats, but they just weren't right for today.

She sighed and flopped down on her parents' waterbed. "None of them will work, Mom," she said as she bounced up and down on the waves.

"What exactly are you looking for?" asked her mom. "And don't bounce on my bed."

"That's the trouble," murmured Charlotte. She stopped bouncing. "I just don't know. I need the perfect hat today, and I can't find it. Does Dad have any good hats?"

"Dad doesn't wear hats."

"He does, too. He had on a blue one last night when came home from work."

"That's different. That was a hard hat. It's for protection."

"Oh," sighed Charlotte. She fell back on the bed, sighing and throwing her arm over her eyes. "What am I going to do?"

"Well, maybe Granny can help you. Since you don't have school today, and I have to work, she's going to stay with you."

Just then the doorbell rang. Charlotte leaped off the bed and ran down the stairs with Zelda trying to lick the bottoms of her shoes the whole way to the front door. She stopped with her hand on the knob. "Can I answer it, Mom?" she yelled.

"Yes, and stop yelling," shouted her mom.

Charlotte yanked open the door and ran into the waiting arms of her granny.

"How's my favorite granddaughter today?" her granny asked.

"Just awful," pouted Charlotte. "I simply cannot find the right hat to wear today. I don't know what to do."

They walked inside holding hands. "Well," said her Granny. "We will just have to figure something out."

"Bye, Charlotte," said her mom as she kissed on the forehead and squeezed past her out the door. "Bye, Ma."

Charlotte waved as her mom backed out of the driveway in her blue car.

"Why do you need a hat so badly?" asked her granny.

"Today is a hat day," said Charlotte.

"Oh, well, that explains it all. Maybe we'll go to my house and see what we can find."

"Can Zelda come, too?"

"Sure, why not? Do you want to go now and have lunch at my house, or wait and go after we have lunch here?"

"Now! Oh please, can we go now?"

"Sure, grab some books and doggy toys."

Charlotte raced through the house, throwing books, crayons, a tennis ball, a rubber bone, and a squeaky turtle into a bright blue sequined bag. "Ready!"

The ride to her granny's house was short, but Charlotte couldn't sit still. She couldn't help wondering what would happen if her granny didn't have a hat to match her

out. She guessed nothing would happen, really. But it would definitely ruin her day. She just needed a hat today.

Once they were in the house, Zelda ran around barking, ready to play. But Charlotte didn't want to play. She wanted to find a hat.

Her granny led her to a closet in the spare bedroom. "Now," she said, "let's find you a hat." She opened the door and Charlotte saw the most wonderful collection of hats she had ever seen. Hats of every color and shape she could think of hung on hooks and sat on shelves. Some glittered with sequins and others were fluffy with feathers. She had always known her granny had great hats, but she had never imagined anything this wonderful.

Just then she spotted a fantastic purple velvet hat. "Can I try that one?" she asked.

"Sure," said her granny as she pulled it down from the shelf. She placed it on Charlotte's head and turned her toward the mirror. "What do you think?"

Charlotte studied her reflection. The purple velvet matched the purple stripe in her skirt exactly. The neon green sequins around the band added just the right sparkle. It was almost perfect. "It's great."

"I think it needs something," said her granny, tapping her chin. "Ah, I know." She reached into a bag hanging on the door and pulled out a red glittery clip with a large red feather in it.

"What's that?" asked Charlotte.

"It's like a hat pin, but it isn't a pin. It's a clip so you can't stick yourself on it." She clipped it to the band of the hat. "Now what do you think?"

With the clip, it was exactly what she had been looking for. "Oh, it's so wonderful! Where did you get it?"

"It's from a Halloween costume I wore a few years ago. Looks better on you than it did on me. Think I should find a hat, too?"

"Of course," said Charlotte, still looking in the mirror, turning this way and that. "Today is a hat day."

"Should we get Zelda one, too?"

"She doesn't like to wear hats. I've tried."

"Guess it'll just be me and you then. How about this one?" Her granny had put on a peacock blue fedora with a fuchsia ribbon as the band. "And since we look so grand, how about lunch out today?"

Charlotte squealed. "This is the best hat day ever! Can we bring something back for Zelda?"

"Of course."

"Let's go. Today is a hat day, and everybody should know it!"

The Treasure of Homanamana

“Mandy, this is my backyard. We can’t have any adventures here,” said Betty, tired of Mandy’s weird games.

“Sure we can,” said Mandy. “Look, I’ve got a treasure map right here.”

“Treasure map?” asked Betty, trying not to sound interested. “Where’d you get that?”

“From my dad’s old sea chest in the dark and spooky attic.”

“Your dad’s an electrician and your house doesn’t have an attic. Let me see that.” Betty yanked the map from Mandy’s hands. “Mandy, you drew this map with cutouts from the back of a ‘Lucky Treasures’ cereal box.”

“I know, but can’t you just pretend? I mean, it’ll be fun.”

Betty stared at the map made of cardboard and crayon. “I don’t know.”

“That tree at the top of your hill,” said Mandy, pointing at a large tree in Betty’s backyard, “doesn’t it look a lot like this tree on the map where the trail starts?” The tree on the map was a smiling cartoon drawing cut from the back of the cereal box.

Betty looked from the smiling drawing on the map to the real tree. “Maybe a little. But it isn’t smiling.”

Mandy rolled her eyes. “Close enough. Aren’t you even a little bit curious?”

Betty tried not to show it, but she was more than a little curious to know if there might be treasure somewhere in her yard. “Well, I guess there’s no harm in looking, right?”

Mandy let out a big whoop. “Great! My mom will pack us some provisions.’

“Provisions? What are provisions?”

“Stuff you take with you on a treasure hunt. Don’t worry, my mom will know.”

A little later, Mandy’s mom packed each girl a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich, an apple, a thermos of water and a little trail mix. Each girl was then equipped with a flashlight for night exploring, a roll of string (because every good explorer has it) and a garden trowel for treasure digging. Mandy’s mom also packed an old, lightweight pink blanket for making a tent. “This sounds like it could be a long trip,” she said. “You’ll need a tent to camp overnight.”

Outside at the top of Betty’s back hill again, Mandy pulled out the map. “Okay, first things first.”

“Give me the map?” asked Betty.

“No, find good walking sticks. Every good adventurer has one.”

“I knew that. I just wanted to see if you knew.” They set about finding good walking sticks at the edge of the woods in Betty’s yard.

“Sticks found,” Betty said. “Now do I get the map?”

“Why should you get the map?” asked Mandy, clutching the map tightly to her chest. “I found it.”

“But it’s of my yard.”

Mandy thought for a moment. “Why don’t we trade off? But I get it first because I found it.”

“Oh, all right. Let’s just get going.”

Mandy studied the map. “Okay, so we’re already at the top of the Blandini Mountain next to the Giant Tree of Jealouwa, and that’s where we need to be.”

“Mountain? Tree of what?”

"We're pretending that your yard follows this map," said Mandy with her hands on her hips. "Remember? That would make your back hill the mountain on the map."

"Oh, right."

"My dad helped me make, I mean find, this map, and he said all treasure maps are done in directions and paces. So we go thirty paces north from here. Where's north?"

"How should I know?"

"It's your yard."

"Okay, the sun goes down in front of the house, and that's west, so that's 'waffles.' So, 'Never—Eat—Soggy—Waffles.' That's north." She pointed proudly to her right. "What's a pace?"

"Great job! Hm, I don't know. It's probably some kind of step or something, you know, like walking, running, skipping."

"Well, if we have to count each one, it better be a slow step."

The girls paced off thirty slow, giant steps to the north and came to the neighbors' wooden fence. "The Wall of Pharagran," said Mandy, in awe.

"Otherwise known as the Beechers' fence," said Betty. "Now what?"

"Two hundred fifty paces west. Can you count that high?"

"We'll find out," said Betty as she started down the hill, counting her steps and trying hard to pretend she was climbing down a mountain. She imagined it would be hard to climb down a steep, rocky mountain. She was glad she had a walking stick and the Wall of Whatever-it-was it to hold onto when she slipped on loose rocks. When they

reached the bottom, she called for a short rest. They sat with their backs to the Wall and munched trail mix.

As they stood up to begin again, Mandy screamed and fell on the ground, clutching her left ankle. "Noooo! Help me, Betty!"

Betty jumped away from Mandy and screamed, "What's the matter with you?"

Mandy rolled on the ground, panting and grunting. "It's the – ugh – Woman-Eating Vines of Karactactooey. Eek!" She rolled into Betty's dad's pumpkin patch, wrapping herself in vines. "Get your flashlight, they hate light!"

Betty rummaged through her purple backpack for her blue metal flashlight. Just as she found it, Mandy tossed a vine at her.

"Ack, they're coming after you!" wailed Mandy.

"What? Oh, right." Betty sat down in the grass. "Ah, help. It's got me."

"Use your flashlight!" panted Mandy. She stopped rolling and fighting. "And play along, will you?"

"Oh, right. Prepare to be fried!" Betty turned on her flashlight and aimed it at the vine on her leg. It shrank away from the light! She turned the bright light on the vines trapping Mandy, and they, too, crawled away squealing.

Mandy rolled out of the patch of killer vines. "Whew, that was close. Let's get moving again."

The girls continued down the side of the house, into the front yard and stopped at the street after exactly two hundred fifty paces. Following the map, they turned south for fifty paces. Fifty paces south brought them to the rocky border between Betty's yard and

Mandy's driveway, and Betty's ditch. "Now we cross the Barbadingding River and head east to the Melazee Willow Tree."

"You're kidding me, right?" asked Betty. "We have to go through my ditch? Why couldn't we've just gone through the front yard?"

"Because the map says we have to, and the front hill is infested with Tickling Gopher-Deer."

"Gopher-what?"

"Tickling Gopher-Deer. They pop up out of their holes and tickle you till you wet your pants."

"Good reason to cross the ditch, I mean river. Better take off our socks and shoes." They stowed their socks and shoes in their backpacks and tied themselves together with string while crossed the pretend river, just in case. The current was strong, but both girls were good swimmers.

They reached the opposite bank pretty quickly and staggered toward the willow tree for a rest. "Whew." said Mandy, flopping down on the grass in the shade. "It's late. We should eat dinner and then camp here for the night."

"Late?" asked Mandy. "Oh, right. Food's good." She gobbled a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich, surprised at how hungry she was. Then they tied string from the trunk of the tree to some of the low-hanging branches for the tent and hung the pink blanket over the string. They used large gray rocks to hold down the edges of the tent.

They lay under their small gray tent listening to robins chirping and cicadas buzzing in the branches above them. Neither one of them was really sleepy. "I slept great," said Mandy, sitting up and stretching about a minute later.

"Me too," said Betty, going along with Mandy because she was bored of lying down. "Do I get the map today?" she asked as she untied the string from the tree.

"Sure," said Mandy as she folded and repacked the blanket.

Betty studied the map. "Looks like we go around the corner of the house. I mean, forty paces East."

"Going around the Temple of Lewlowlee, you mean."

"Right. Um, there aren't any names of things on here."

"Just make them up," said Mandy, dragging her by the hand.

Forty paces later, they were in the backyard again. "There aren't any paces marked anymore," said Betty. "What does that mean?"

"Probably it's more dangerous now," said Mandy. "Probably no one's ever gotten this far. The rest of the map is like a fairy tale. But the treasure's real, of course."

"Ooh, exciting. Now we go north to the patio, I mean, the Desert of... Zwalingadoo." The girls moved slowly through the Temple Gardens, which looked a lot like Betty's mom's vegetable garden, staying close to the temple wall. "Now we go through the garage, I mean the Cave of Gamalvague, and -"

"Get down!" hissed Mandy, grabbing Betty and yanking her down into a yellow squash plant. "Look, it's the Dragon of Vorgashamel."

"You mean Fargo?" said Betty. Fargo was Betty's black and white rat terrier, lying asleep on his back on the concrete patio, halfway between the temple and the garage.

"Doesn't look very fierce to me."

"He's guarding the cave. How are we going to get past him?"

Just then the dragon yawned, rolled over and stretched. He wagged his tail and trotted out into the yard.

The girls raced across the unguarded desert toward the entrance to the cave. They crept inside the dark, cool, quiet cave. The entrance disappeared behind them. All they could hear was dripping water.

"That was lucky," said Mandy, leaning against the cave wall.

"Yup," said Betty, searching for her blue flashlight in her bag. After finding it, she studied the map. "Okay, says we have to push a special rock to get out of here. So start pressing rocks." Mandy pushed on different places on the cave wall, and Betty pushed on the garage door opener. "Found it." An opening appeared in the cave wall, and the girls ran through it.

"Look!" shouted Betty, pointing to the landscape rocks near her front porch.

"We've found it! The Treasure of Homanamana!" They jumped up and down as they ran toward the treasure.

They pulled out their trowels and began digging through the rocks. "Here's a bluish one," said Mandy. "Take this one."

"I like blue," said Betty. "We should leave some so we can come back some other time."

"Good idea. Oh, hand me that sparkly one over there." They continued dividing up small piles of precious stones to take with them, wrapping them carefully in their tent blanket to protect them.

Their treasure carefully stowed in their bags, the girls set about finding a way back home. "I know," said Betty, pointing at the front door of her house. "We can use

the Magic Door of Yargesstelania. It'll take us anywhere we tell it to. Hold my hand and yell out 'Betty's house' when we jump through it."

The girls grabbed each others' hands, leaped through the door screaming, and landed on the brown carpet of Betty's hallway. "We made it!" they both shouted, jumping up and down. "Let's go show my mom our treasure," said Betty, running into the kitchen.

"My, what fantastic jewels," said Betty's mom while the girls pulled out their rocks. "What's say we trade treasures? I'll give you all these fresh baked chocolate chip cookies for those jewels."

"Okay," said Betty, snatching a cookie from her mom's outstretched hand.

"What?!" shrieked Mandy. "After all that work? The danger? The dragon? Are you crazy?"

"I would rather have a treasure I can eat over a heavy one I have to lug around in a bag any day," said Betty, cramming another cookie in her mouth.

Mandy looked at the warm, gooey cookies. "You know," she said, grabbing a cookie from the plate, "that's a very good point. I think we're getting the better end of the trade."

"Hey, Mom," said Betty through mouthful of cookie, "can we have some milk to go with our treasure?"

Both girls giggled, enjoying their chocolaty treasure, and made plans for hunting wild animals in Mandy's yard the next day.

Dennis the Hockey Dog

Dennis the Dog had just started eating his breakfast of “P-Nutty Bacon Crunchies” cereal when the phone rang. It has to be Kelly, thought Dennis. She was the only one that ever called him during breakfast.

“Hello?” said Dennis, a little grumpy.

“Oh, Dennis!” said Kelly the Cat. “I’ve-“

“Hang on a sec,” interrupted Dennis. He put down the receiver, dragged his chair over to the phone and began eating again. “Okay,” he said through a mouthful of Crunchies. “Tell me all about what we’re going to do today.”

“I’ve got the greatest idea. I got this flyer from the ice rink, see, and-“

Dennis groaned. “Aw, Kelly, you know how I feel about ice skating.”

“Yes, I do, and so I thought you would love this. They’re starting a beginners’ hockey league at the rink in town.”

Dennis nearly choked on his Crunchies. “Hockey?! Kelly, have you lost your mind? I can barely skate. And I don’t have any equipment. And I really don’t feel like getting smashed today. I mean, I’ve seen those guys on television and it looks pretty rough.”

“Oh, Dennis, calm down. I can’t skate, either. They have equipment at the rink you can borrow today just to try it out. That way, if you hate it, you don’t have to pay the rental fee. And I won’t let anyone smash you, I promise. I don’t think they let you get smashed when you first start. Nobody would play if they did.”

“Real comforting. And who are ‘they’?”

"The hockey instructors. Now are you coming with me or not?"

"Gees, keep your claws in. I'll try it, but if I get smashed, I'm coming home."

"Good, I'll be over in a little bit."

Dennis slowly hung up the phone. What have I gotten myself into now? he thought. His soggy Crunchies were no longer appetizing. Many of Kelly's "great ideas" had made Dennis ill, and this was definitely one of them. He wasn't so sure that hockey was a good sport for a small white dog. He had watched hockey on TV many times and had fun. But that was watching. Playing was an entirely different matter.

Just then Dennis' front door flew open. "Ready yet?" asked Kelly, her green eyes sparkling.

Dennis was still sitting in his kitchen chair by the phone with his soggy bowl of cereal. "Um, sure. Give me a minute. I need to call a neighbor and make sure someone can take care of Sausage while I'm in the hospital." Sausage was Dennis' parakeet.

"Will you quit? You're not going to get hurt. Now grab some money and let's go."

Kelly was so excited when they got to the rink, she simply couldn't stand still. She smacked Dennis in the back with her swishing tail three times while they waited in line to rent their skates. Her ears simply wouldn't stop twitching while they waited in the lobby for their rental equipment.

"What kind of 'equipment' do we need?" asked Dennis.

Kelly stopped swishing and twitching. "Well, to be honest, I'm not sure."

Just then a large white boxer climbed up on a chair. "Okay, everyone," he said in a loud voice. "Let's line up to get pads."

Dennis didn't know what that meant, but he got in line with everyone else. When it was his turn, a yellowish tabby helped him into a pair of black shorts that were thick and stiff, strapped pads on his shins, fitted some awkward pads over his shoulders and strapped others over his elbows. He got to choose a lovely bright blue jersey with matching blue padded gloves. The large white dog laced up Dennis' skates very tightly and put a helmet on his small black head. Dennis had to pay two dollars to buy a special piece of bright orange rubber to put in his mouth to protect his teeth. A hairy gray schnauzer gave him a hockey stick and then he was finally dressed.

Dennis felt like a knight prepared to fight a dragon. Everything was so heavy. He could hardly move. It wasn't easy to walk in skates anyway, but with all of this stuff on it was even worse. He tried to walk very carefully because he knew if he fell over he would never be able to get up again. The orange rubber tasted strange and the helmet smelled like his neighbor's compost heap. He was hot under all of the pads.

"Hey, Den, isn't this great?" Kelly said as she came bouncing up to him wearing a bright yellow jersey. Her tail was still swishing.

He spit out the orange rubber mouthpiece. "Yeah, great."

"Let's get on the ice," said the white dog. He held open the door to the ice and everyone climbed through one by one. Dennis decided he must be a coach.

Once on the ice, Dennis managed to skate a few wobbly strides. Maybe this won't be so bad, he thought. Then he fell flat on his back. Well, this is it, he thought, I'm stuck and I think I broke my tail.

The white coach dog skated over and said, "Hey, blue dog, you okay?" He grabbed Dennis by the paw and pulled him up onto his skates.

"Uh, sure," said Dennis. "I'm fine. My tail broke my fall."

"Don't worry kid, you'll be fine." He skated off to the other side of the rink.

Sure, thought Dennis. He took a step and fell again. Kelly stumbled by as he lay on his back.

"Having fun?" she asked.

"Oh yeah, this is great. Best idea you've ever had. So tell me really, are you trying to kill me?"

Kelly laughed and skated away unsteadily. Dennis rolled over onto his stomach and used his stick to push himself back up onto his skates. He took a few shaky steps and started to fall again, but the white coach dog caught him.

"Thanks," said Dennis miserably. "I don't think I'm so good at this. Maybe I should go home."

"You're fine," said the white dog. "That pup over there has been lying on his back and crying since he got on the ice and telling everyone that comes near him that I'm trying to kill him. He's my son. What's your name, kid?"

Dennis laughed. "My name's Dennis. I'm not going to get smashed, am I?"

He chortled. "There's no checking in beginning leagues, Dennis, don't worry. I'm Mr. Barnes and I think you're doing just fine. Come down this way with me and I'll teach you how to fall without hurting your tail and how to stop."

Dennis hadn't even thought about stopping. He hadn't been able to go yet. He clutched Mr. Barnes' paw and slid and slipped to a corner of the rink. Mr. Barnes was very patient and a great teacher. He knew a lot about hockey.

Standing up became a little easier as the morning went on and Dennis even learned how to turn, sort of. He was very pleased with himself when he was able to go around the rink and only fall twice, especially since he didn't hurt his tail.

Then Mr. Barnes blew his whistle to get everyone's attention. "All right, now we're going to get out the pucks and let you try taking some shots." He emptied a huge white bucket of black pucks onto the ice and began showing a small cat in a black jersey how to hit one.

Dennis hadn't seen Kelly in awhile. He turned around very slowly to look for her just as she crashed into his back and knocked them both flat on the ice. "Whoops, sorry, Dennis!"

"It's okay," he said. "I'm all right. Or I will be if you'll get off me!" The two untangled themselves and their sticks and helped one another up again. "Let's go hit some pucks."

Hitting pucks was a lot harder than it had looked on TV. Every time Dennis hit one, he fell down. Mr. Barnes told him that was normal. "It's hard to keep your balance and take a shot at the same time." Dennis felt better when he saw Kelly falling down, too. At least he wasn't the only one.

Soon it was time to go home and Dennis was thrilled. He couldn't ever remember being so tired. After he and Kelly had taken off all their pads, they didn't really know what to do with them so they asked Mr. Barnes.

"Are you going to come back for practice next weekend?" asked Mr. Barnes.

Kelly answered right away, "I am!"

Dennis thought for a minute. "Yeah, I think so. I mean, I had fun, but I'm not very good."

"Good doesn't matter, just so long as you have fun."

"Then yeah, I'll come back."

"Great! Then you both need to go over and talk to Mrs. Manes. She'll record what equipment you have and give you a bag to carry it in."

Kelly was still bouncing up and down when they got back to Dennis' house. "That was so great! I can't wait till next weekend. Let's go skating tomorrow. We need the practice."

Dennis yawned. "If I can wake up, sure I'll go." He was so tired it was hard to lift his bag of hockey stuff into his closet.

"Did you have fun?"

He yawned again. "I had a great time, actually. I was pretty surprised. I'm actually looking forward to next weekend. Mr. Barnes is really great and he helped me a lot."

"So what do you want to do now?"

"Take a nap. Or maybe take a bath and then take a nap."

"Want to come over and watch the hockey game on TV with me later?"

"Sure." He yawned so hard he thought his jaw would crack. "Just call me and wake me up. Can we order pizza? I'm too tired to cook."

"Okay, have a nice nap, Den." Kelly slammed the front door as she went out but Dennis was too sleepy to care.

He crawled onto his fluffy blue couch and covered up with his purple fuzzy blanket. He hadn't liked all the hot, heavy pads he had to wear, but he had to admit that hockey really was fun. And tiring.